

THE MEASURE

A JOURNAL OF POETRY



Poems by Zoë Akins, Louise Townsend Nicholl,
David Morton - - - - -

Quiet Singing, a Review of Willa Cather's Poetry

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A Night, London

MY soul has shut and opened many doors—
Gone like a vagabond from house to house—
Roamed like a hunter mountains and wild moors—
And gazed from under flowering apple-boughs
At green-white ocean waters; and again
Seen not the moving iridescent foam
Along the actual ship-path—but a vain
Vision of apple-trees a-bloom at home;—
For one of all its careless ways has been
To give itself to yesterdays—to stand,
As now, where city streets are gathering close
And see no single thing except the green
Of gardens, and a peach-vine like a hand
Press to a wall its fingers tipped with rose.

—Zoë Akins

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Wooden Spades

*When I was down beside the sea
A wooden spade they gave to me
To dig the sandy shore. . .*

CHILD'S GARDEN OF VERSES

I

THIS boat has no white sail—
Whether wind blow or fail
What will it matter?

It has no joy to ride
Like a fleet thing tied
In blue water—

It is heavy as batter
And needs no more securing
Than these encroaching sands
Which make its sunken mooring,
Possessing it,
Like the remembered feel,
Obsessing it,
Of its slow builder's gentle blundering hands.
Wet sand has dried
Along the blinded keel.

It would do better
To lie in a lost lagoon
Or a weed-webbed pond.
Needing no fetter
It will never run thirstily drinking the morning air
Of harbor and sea beyond,—
Running with thirsty throat
Till the wind's diminished.
It is sad that a boat
Which was never finished
Should go so soon
To unrepair.

II

Open your hand—
Let the sand drop out
Onto the sand again.

It has taken a form from your hand, no doubt,
From your short fingers,
Your strong thumb,
From the heat of your hand
And its broad shape.
But no heat lingers
When dark is come—
It will go back into sand again,
It will succumb.
It had no will of its own to clot—
That was only because your hand was hot.

What did you think to do, then?
Did you think to rape
From the careful sea?
Open your hand—
Carelessly.

Ice Agony

THIS ice can not be tightened any more—
There must come loosening about the shore
Of thinning wafers which recede and flake. . .
Oak-leaves would show, in brittle glass immersed.

Oh, for some thunder underneath to shake
The solid silentness, some roughened flaw
In this white width of glare, to let the first
Released black water slowly ooze and spread
And sink at last dark depth of light instead!
This is a death-mask featured to confuse—
The deft geometry the skaters draw,
Imposed designings that their bright blades make,
Are not the ceaseless curves the currents lose,
The fluid, living patterns of the lake.
And still the tortured water does not stir!

I can remember that quick Springs occur—
Thaw follows freezing, flooding follows thaw.
In half-light looms the wreckage that I saw
Borne down a valley when the waters burst—
Wreckage resisting, blindly conscious, swept
Upstanding strangely, nothing stayed or kept.

Though such imaginable flood shall take
The banks, the dam the rising waters leapt,
And leave the hollow bed to crack and bake
The ice must break, must break!

Black Mist

BLACK mist is through the orchard, thinly dark
Over the rainy ground where old snows rot—
A horizontal torrent which has got
In every crotch and under loosened bark.
This is a night which has been left unsaid—
No white hand must be thrust out now to blot
The blackness of the moisture up, or knot
The thread of heritage from poets dead.
How many times this night, rain-warm, snow-sweet,
Will come, insistent and reiterate,
This black and permeating mist repeat,
To haunt a certain kind of poet's mind!
Before this fluid night is fixed, how late
The time, how many of its lovers blind!

—*Louise Townsend Nicholl*

The Owl

I'D liefer hear a white bitch howl
And know a man was dying;
Than, in night's black recess, the owl,
Like a mangled goblin, crying.

I'd liefer see a madman bound,
Writhing upon his bars;
Than in this awful noose of sound
The hung and staring stars.

—*Kenneth Slade Alling*

Grotesque

THE dusk has garmented the great, gaunt hills
With long-robed, regal vestures where they stand,
Like kings abandoned, now, whose futile wills
Are laughter in a loud, rebellious land.
The light moves off and leaves them and they wait
In gloomy ghostliness and still and stark,
To hold what councils of avenging fate,
Nodding their heads together in the dark!

Best speak not lightly of them, lest they come
And range about you sleeping in your bed,
Black shapes of wrath grown terrible and dumb,
And you wish back your breath and what you said
Ere now there have been stories told of some
Found scatheless in the dawn, too strangely dead.

A King In Egypt

LIFT up the shuttered eyelids that were drawn
On splendid pageantries once pictured there:—
We are too tardy, they are centuries gone;
There is no road to countries that they fare.
And heed the pulse if it be swift to change,
And listen at the lips if still they keep
Some word that once were passionate and strange
For one who heard and smiled and fell asleep.

He is not desecrate; his life were all
Inviolate still within his own brief day:
Some joy of swords or April at his wall,
Music and heartbreak and a name to say
Of one who somehow touched his youth with dream,
And passed, another leaf upon the stream.

—*David Morton*

Three Trees

THE somnolent mountain looms, brooding in green-shadowed stillness,
But here at its foot where a meadow slopes to the river,
Three young trees poise trembling. They have run down from the forest
Where boughs interwoven, crowded too thickly about them,
Where night after night, they joined in a myriad moaning,
The wind-rhythmed chant of a million leaves lifting and touching,
Where, under their growing and swaying, the great mountain held them
Closer than fur on the tawny back of a lion.

Three trees have run out of the forest and down to river,
Stretching their slim, young arms in a green joy of living,
Dryads, they stand with their sensitive heads in the air,
Harping their songs to the wind who fingers their branches.
Their roots are cooled by the swift, clear running of water,
And over their heads is the sky unbroken by nets of flung boughs.

Trees on the mountain are safer, but fear is not dreadful,
Fear is a price one forgets in the rapture of freedom it pays for.
Stars reassure them, calling across to the moon as it rises,
"Three trees have run out of the forest and down to the river."

—Helen Ives Gilchrist

I Went Out Alone

I WENT out alone;
I no longer dread
To go out alone;
I held up my head:
The river, the river-bed
Were white as a stone
Planted for the dead;
The wind had blown
Volley on volley
Of snow, had thrown
Tremor of melancholy
Across the world. It was folly
To walk in the wind's tread,
But I held up my head,
I went out alone.

I have learned to go
Alone: for the word
Is "Go, go, go
Alone." The blue bird
Goes and is heard
No more; there is snow
And a thudding under
The frozen river,
And the long shiver
Of sun-silver below
The sun, and the thunder
Of snow. There was wonder
Of love, the dark blunder
To beauty. But the word
Is "Go, go, go!"

—*Joseph Auslander*

Never a Fox

UNDER white birch trees, maples,
Round by the red osiers,
Under the low willows,
Over the brook,
Through frosted brambles
I have followed marks in the snow,
I have followed where a fox went,
I have ached to see a fox.
Only patterns of colored twigs,
Mauve, mulberry, red, green,
Only black-flecked birch trunks against the snow,
Half-fallen pine trunks
Criss-cross and slant,
Up and down, triangles of snow,
Meshwork of woodland.
I have followed and followed
And peered through and through,
Squinted into the patterned white,
Looked beyond and beyond.
Never a fox,
Never a strange animal,
Only birds laughing upside down,
Scattering seeds,
Birds with red shoulders and grey feet,
Winter birds come down for a little while
From the far North.

H. Underwood Hoyt

Last Days of the Scout

NO more do mountains form against the dawn
As he rides the benches in the early light.
There was a day when his strong eyes could see
The smoke plumes of the alien fires
Far off and wavering on the sky,
But it is gone.
All that is left is night.
His mind is filled with figures of old time.
Pale mountains stretch across the world.
The prairie grasses ripple at his feet.
What stirred behind that fallen cottonwood?
Why did the blackbirds startle into flight?

If he could only find those hills again,
The smooth wind fresh against his withered cheeks!
But blind old eyes could never see
Those shining piles of beauty.
The trail might slide along the stony ridge,
The buffalo crowd dark across the land,
The distant buttes thicken and blurr with rain,
It would not matter now.
Nothing is left today for one to whom
The tale of slippery pass and enemy camp was plain.

Nothing but hours upon a plodding horse
Along farm lanes between flat peaceful fields.
When one is old and blind a dog is good
To run back barking to the house
When the old foolish horse begins to roam,
And someone comes with careful woman hands
To lead both ancient things back home.

—*Gwendolen Haste*

The Humming-Bird

THE sundial makes no sign
At the point of the August noon.
The sky is of ancient tin,
And the ring of the mountains diffused and unmade,
(One always remembers them).
On the twisted dark of the hemlock hedge
Rain, like a line of shivering violin-bows
Hissing together, poised on the last turgescent swell,
Batters the flowers.
Under the trumpet-vine arbor,
Clear, precise as an Audubon print,
The air is of melted glass,
Solid, filling interstices
Of leaves that are spaced on the spines
Like a pattern ground into glass;
Dead, as though dull red glass were poured into the mouth,
Choking the breath, molding itself into the pulses of soft red tissues.

And a humming-bird darts head first,
Splitting the air, keen as a spurt of fire shot from the blow-pipe,
Cracking a star of rays; dives like a flash of fire,
Forked tail lancing the air, into the immobile trumpet;
Stands on the air, wings like a triple shadow
Whizzing around him.

Shadows thrown on the midnight streets by a snow-flecked arc-light,
Shadows like sword-play,
Splinters and spines from a thousand dreams
Whizz from his wings!

Spring Moss

THESE are the fringes of long-tailed birds
That sleep in Death's aviaries.

These
Are the strings of the harps that are borne before
His singers of pedigrees;
Echoing silvery names that are loud no more,
And ermined heraldic words.

These are the jasmines, the white, white roses, the eglantines
That garland with tiers of their indolent curves
Death's balladines.

And these, when his torturers handle the curdling flesh
Of dreams, these are the fine-drawn nerves,
Hung in a gasping tangle, a squirming and quicksilver mesh.

This is the conquering beauty of Death, sardonic, his arrogant play;
Cat's-cradles of ruin he hangs on the tight-clenched cones of the
pines,
In the teeth of the day.

—Beatrice Ravenel

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ACTING EDITOR: GEORGE O'NEIL

Quiet Singing

April Twilights and Other Poems, by Willa Cather. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

IT is interesting to go back to these poems from the novels of Willa Cather. There is such a rare sensitiveness to the sheerly beautiful in her prose, and such an unfailing response to the opportunities for expressing clear beauties of the Earth and the moods which they induce, that one knowing her powers takes up this single collection of her lyrics with certain expectancy. That the book is a new issue of early work, with additions, sharpens the reader's anticipation, offering the possible observation of an artist's development.

In the poems there is that same lucid simplicity which distinguishes her prose, a classic conservation of the purest essentials. There are no obscurities and no complexities in the intention of these lyrics. There is perhaps an absence of the conventional tilts at ecstasy that one finds, as a rule, in small collections of purely lyric verse. The moods of these stanzas, as the title would indicate, are not strenuous, there is no apparent effort in them to be impressive. There is quiet singing and, in the instance of several poems, exceptionally moving drama quietly achieved. Perhaps the most striking example of this is "The Swedish Mother," which opens in ballad form—

"You shall hear the tale again—
Hush, my red-haired daughter."
Brightly burned the sunset gold
On the black pond water.

Red the pasture ridges gleamed
Where the sun was sinking.
Slow the windmill rasped and wheezed
Where the herd was drinking.

The mother's childish recitation which follows is singularly touching and effective.

Several of the poems are classic in subject as well as in manner. There is an "Antinous" for instance, and "Winter at Delphi." These are built with lines of workmanship but they are not where Miss Cather is Happiest. "The Palatine" which opens the second half of the book is the most successful treatment of a classic theme, it seems to me, and the method is not classic; it is cast as a ballad.

"Oh, how high is Caesar's house,
Brother, big brother?

"Goats about the doorways browse:
Night hawks nest in the burnt roof-tree,
Home of the wild bird and home of the bee.
A thousand chambers of marble lie
Wide to the sun and wide to the sky.
Poppies we find amongst our wheat
Grow on Caesar's banquet seat.
Cattle crop and neatherds drowse
On the floors of Caesar's house."

As one would expect, where there are dramatic possibilities, Miss Cather produces her most telling strokes in the subjective poems. In the first poem, for example, "Grandmither, think not I forget," it is the story, scantily as it is carried through the singing measures, which does most to make the poem moving; and in "A Silver Cup" this is more obviously true. In this, the story is so frankly the important thing that the blank verse lines acquire a subtlety carrying them close to prose. In "Street in Packington" there is vivid description of a symbolical fragment. This is realism, deft, satisfying.

In the gray dusk before a frail gray shed,
By a board fence obscenely chalked in red,
A gray creek willow, left from country days,
Flickers pallid in the haze.

Beside the gutter on the unpaved street,
Tin cans and broken glass about his feet,
And a brown whisky bottle, singled out
For play from prosier crockery strewn about,
Twisting a shoestring noose, a Polack's brat
Joylessly torments a cat.

* * * * *

He mauls her neither less nor more
Because her claws have raked him sore.
His eyes, faint-blue and moody, stare
From under a pale shock of hair.

Then occurs this irony—

To hurt and to be hurt; he knows
All he will know on earth, or need to know.

And the end—

But there, beneath his willow tree,
His tribal, tutelary tree,
The tortured cat across his knee,
With hate, perhaps, a threat, maybe,
Lithuania looks at me.

This is a sharper note than is sounded anywhere else in the book. To one who knows "My Antonia" and its unforgettable records of Nebraska's plains, its nerve-touching descriptions and earth-nostalgias, such a title as "Prairie Spring" is full of promise. And here Miss Cather catches what she knows and appears to love better than other things and holds its beauties in poignant simple lines.

Evening and the flat land,
Rich and somber and always silent;
The miles of fresh-plowed soil,
Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;
The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
The toiling horses, the tired men.

* * * * *

Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses,
Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
Flashing like a star out of the twilight;

* * * * *

Singing and singing,
Out of the lips of silence,
Out of the earthy dusk.

This is what one has hoped for; and there are other places in the book that hold it: "Prairie Dawn" and the narrative "Macon Prairie" and "Going Home, Burlington Route" with its wheels—

Singing and humming,
Singing and humming.
They run remembering
They run rejoicing,
As if they, too, were going home.

The book is divided into two sections and the prefacing note states that the verses in Part II are of later composition than those that go before and were added for the new issue. It seems to me, then, that *April Twilights* is fortunate in its new edition. The work here is estranged from the manner of today's verse relentlessly concerned with surfaces. It is quiet singing, felicitous, with its poignancies and its serene depths.

—George O'Neil

A LETTER

DEAR EDITORS:

This is not an apology; neither is it a howl from the dock. It is merely a statement of certain facts which I feel it my duty to make.

It is obvious that in reviewing Miss Deutsch's Anthology I made use of her excellent introduction. I made use of it because, regardless of pressure, I found it admirably suited to my intention as a reviewer. The introduction contained material which I considered valuable for the immediate occasion and the immediate purpose. I read it through; I then summed it up *in my own words*. I am astonished to learn that such procedure is liable to criminal prosecution—or worse.

As for the sentence with which I am silently accused, I can only say that my Ms. is at her service whenever Miss Deutsch wants to examine it. I do not know that one could do very much more. Not even Agamemnon.

I am not fool enough to delude myself into believing the review worth a tinker's damn. If I have offended I am honestly sorry.

Sincerely, etc.

—Joseph Auslander.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS NUMBER

ZOË AKINS is not as well known for her poetry as she should be. This fact is perhaps due to her wide reputation as a playwright. Her first published work, *Interpretations*, long out of print, was a volume of exceptional lyrics published first in England and afterwards in this country by Mitchell Kennerly.

HELEN IVES GILCHRIST lives in New York and has contributed before to *The Measure*.

HELEN UNDERWOOD HOYT'S poems have appeared in other periodicals.

GWENDOLIN HASTE and BEATRICE RAVENEL have been in *The Measure* before.

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